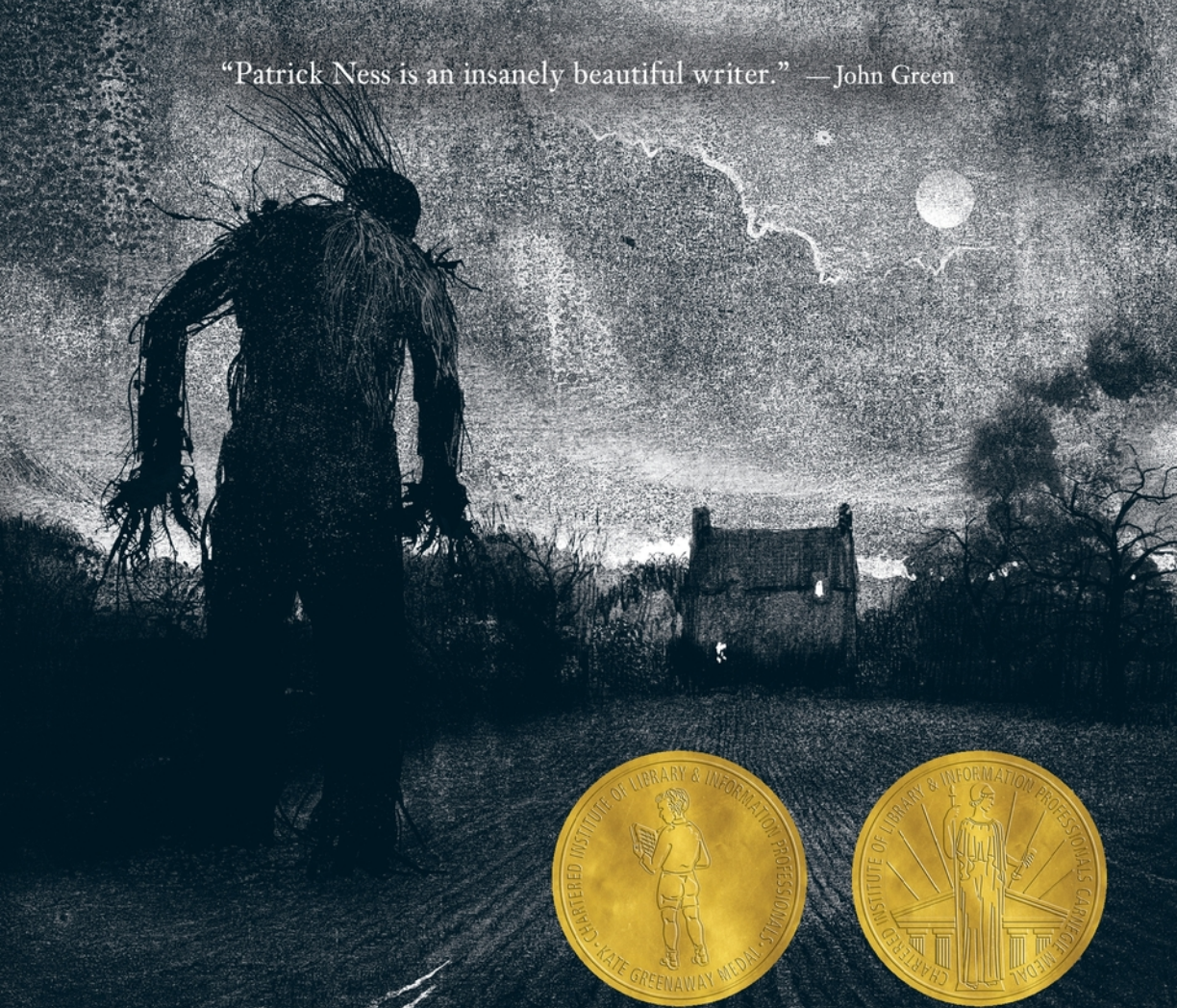


"Patrick Ness is an insanely beautiful writer." — John Green



A MONSTER CALLS

A novel by PATRICK NESS

Inspired by an idea from SIOBHAN DOWD

Illustrated by JIM KAY

A high-contrast, black and white photograph. The right side of the image is dominated by the dark, silhouetted branches of a leafless tree. The branches are gnarled and jagged, reaching upwards and outwards. The background is a bright, grainy, and textured white, suggesting a sky or a light source. The overall mood is stark and dramatic.

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

AUTHORS' NOTE

I never got to meet Siobhan Dowd. I only know her the way that most of the rest of you will—through her superb books. Four electric young adult novels, two published in her lifetime, two after her too-early death. If you haven't read them, remedy that oversight immediately.

This would have been her fifth book. She had the characters, a premise, and a beginning. What she didn't have, unfortunately, was time.

When I was asked if I would consider turning her work into a book, I hesitated. What I wouldn't do—what I *couldn't* do—was write a novel mimicking her voice. That would have been a disservice to her, to the reader, and most importantly to the story. I don't think good writing can possibly work that way.

But the thing about good ideas is that they grow other ideas. Almost before I could help it, Siobhan's ideas were suggesting new ones to me, and I began to feel that itch that every writer longs for: the itch to start getting words down, the itch to tell a story.

I felt—and feel—as if I've been handed a baton, like a particularly fine writer has given me her story and said, "Go. Run with it. Make trouble." So that's what I tried to do. Along the way,

I had only a single guideline: to write a book I think Siobhan would have liked. No other criteria could really matter.

And now it's time to hand the baton on to you. Stories don't end with the writers, however many started the race. Here's what Siobhan and I came up with. So go. Run with it.

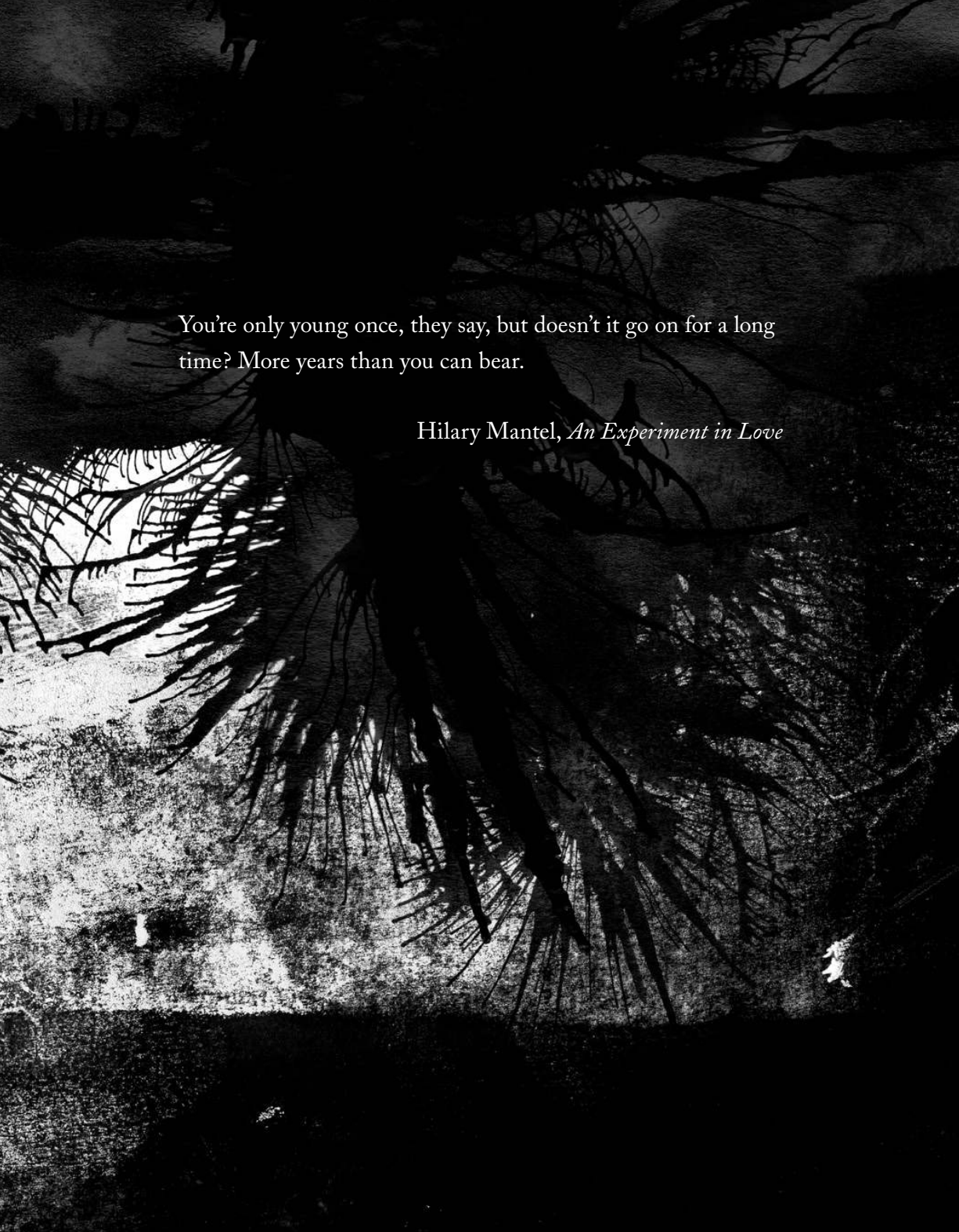
Make trouble.

Patrick Ness

London, February 2011

FOR SIOBHAN

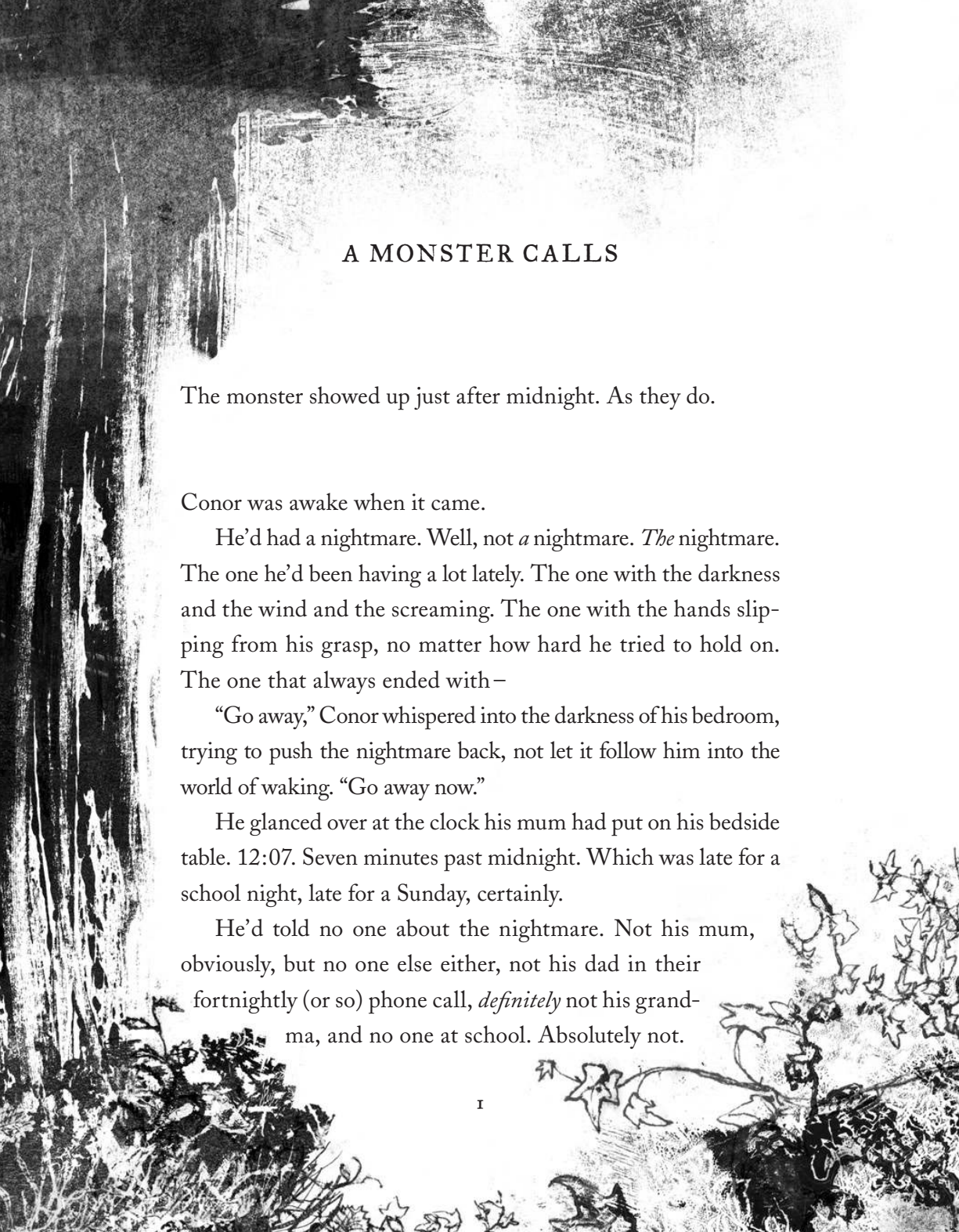




You're only young once, they say, but doesn't it go on for a long
time? More years than you can bear.

Hilary Mantel, *An Experiment in Love*





A MONSTER CALLS

The monster showed up just after midnight. As they do.

Conor was awake when it came.

He'd had a nightmare. Well, not *a* nightmare. *The* nightmare. The one he'd been having a lot lately. The one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming. The one with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he tried to hold on. The one that always ended with –

“Go away,” Conor whispered into the darkness of his bedroom, trying to push the nightmare back, not let it follow him into the world of waking. “Go away now.”

He glanced over at the clock his mum had put on his bedside table. 12:07. Seven minutes past midnight. Which was late for a school night, late for a Sunday, certainly.

He'd told no one about the nightmare. Not his mum, obviously, but no one else either, not his dad in their fortnightly (or so) phone call, *definitely* not his grandma, and no one at school. Absolutely not.

What happened in the nightmare was something no one else ever needed to know.

Conor blinked groggily at his room, then he frowned. There was something he was missing. He sat up in his bed, waking a bit more. The nightmare was slipping from him, but there was something he couldn't put his finger on, something different, something—

He listened, straining against the silence, but all he could hear was the quiet house around him, the occasional tick from the empty downstairs or a rustle of bedding from his mum's room next door.

Nothing.

And then something. Something he realized was the thing that had woken him.

Someone was calling his name.

Conor.

He felt a rush of panic, his guts twisting. Had it followed him? Had it somehow stepped out of the nightmare and—?

“Don't be stupid,” he told himself. “You're too old for monsters.”

And he was. He'd turned thirteen just last month. Monsters were for babies. Monsters were for bedwetters. Monsters were for—

Conor.

There it was again. Conor swallowed. It had been an unusually warm October, and his window was still open. Maybe the curtains shushing each other in the small breeze could have sounded like—

Conor.

All right, it wasn't the wind. It was definitely a voice, but not one he recognized. It wasn't his mother's, that was for sure. It wasn't a woman's voice at all, and he wondered for a crazy moment if his dad had somehow made a surprise trip from America and arrived too late to phone and—

Conor.

No. Not his dad. This voice had a quality to it, a *monstrous* quality, wild and untamed.

Then he heard a heavy creak of wood outside, as if something gigantic was stepping across a timber floor.

He didn't want to go and look. But at the same time, a part of him wanted to look more than anything.

Wide awake now, he pushed back the covers, got out of bed, and went over to the window. In the pale half-light of the moon, he could clearly see the church tower up on the small hill behind his house, the one with the train tracks curving beside it, two hard steel lines glowing dully in the night. The moon shone, too, on the graveyard attached to the church, filled with tombstones you could hardly read anymore.

Conor could also see the great yew tree that rose from the center of the graveyard, a tree so ancient it almost seemed to be made of the same stone as the church. He only knew it was a yew because his mother had told him, first when he was little to make sure he didn't eat the berries, which were poisonous, and again this past year, when she'd started staring out of their kitchen window with a funny look on her face and saying, "That's a yew tree, you know."

And then he heard his name again.

Conor.

Like it was being whispered in both his ears.

"*What?*" Conor said, his heart thumping, suddenly impatient for whatever was going to happen.

A cloud moved in front of the moon, covering the whole landscape in darkness, and a *whoosh* of wind rushed down the hill and into his room, billowing the curtains. He heard the creaking and cracking of wood again, groaning like a living thing, like the hungry stomach of the world growling for a meal.

Then the cloud passed, and the moon shone again.

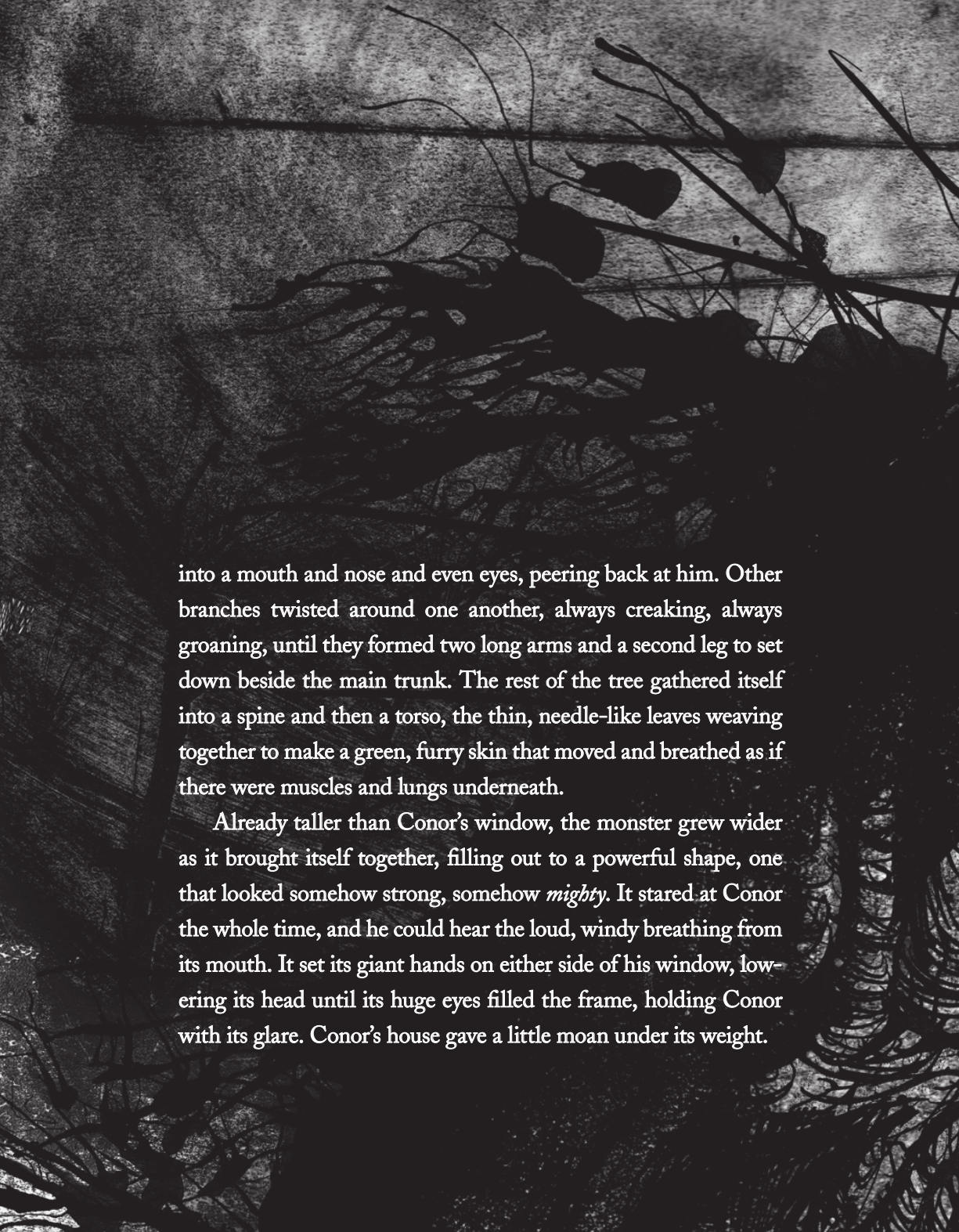
On the yew tree.

Which now stood firmly in the middle of his backyard.

And here was the monster.

As Conor watched, the uppermost branches of the tree gathered themselves into a great and terrible face, shimmering





into a mouth and nose and even eyes, peering back at him. Other branches twisted around one another, always creaking, always groaning, until they formed two long arms and a second leg to set down beside the main trunk. The rest of the tree gathered itself into a spine and then a torso, the thin, needle-like leaves weaving together to make a green, furry skin that moved and breathed as if there were muscles and lungs underneath.

Already taller than Conor's window, the monster grew wider as it brought itself together, filling out to a powerful shape, one that looked somehow strong, somehow *mighty*. It stared at Conor the whole time, and he could hear the loud, windy breathing from its mouth. It set its giant hands on either side of his window, lowering its head until its huge eyes filled the frame, holding Conor with its glare. Conor's house gave a little moan under its weight.







And then the monster spoke.

Conor O'Malley, it said, a huge gust of warm, compost-smelling breath rushing through Conor's window, blowing his hair back. Its voice rumbled low and loud, with a vibration so deep Conor could feel it in his chest.

I have come to get you, Conor O'Malley, the monster said, pushing against the house, shaking the pictures off Conor's wall, sending books and electronic gadgets and an old stuffed toy rhino tumbling to the floor.

A monster, Conor thought. A real, honest-to-goodness monster. In real, waking life. Not in a dream, but here, at his window.

Come to get him.

But Conor didn't run.

In fact, he found he wasn't even frightened.

All he could feel, all he *had* felt since the monster revealed itself, was a growing disappointment.

Because this wasn't the monster he was expecting.

"So come and get me then," he said.

A strange quiet fell.

What did you say? the monster asked.

Conor crossed his arms. "I said, come and get me then."

The monster paused for a moment, and then with a *roar* it pounded two fists against the house. Conor's ceiling buckled under the blows, and huge cracks appeared in the walls. Wind filled the room, the air thundering with the monster's angry bellows.

"Shout all you want," Conor shrugged, barely raising his voice. "I've seen worse."

The monster roared even louder and smashed an arm through Conor's window, shattering glass and wood and brick. A huge, twisted, branch-wound hand grabbed Conor around the middle and lifted him off the floor. It swung him out of his room and into the night, high above his backyard, holding him up against the circle of the moon, its fingers clenching so hard against Conor's ribs he could barely breathe. Conor could see raggedy teeth made of hard, knotted wood in the monster's open mouth, and he felt warm breath rushing up toward him.

Then the monster paused again.

You really aren't afraid, are you?

"No," Conor said. "Not of you, anyway."

The monster narrowed its eyes.

You will be, it said. *Before the end.*

And the last thing Conor remembered was the monster's mouth roaring open to eat him alive.



BREAKFAST

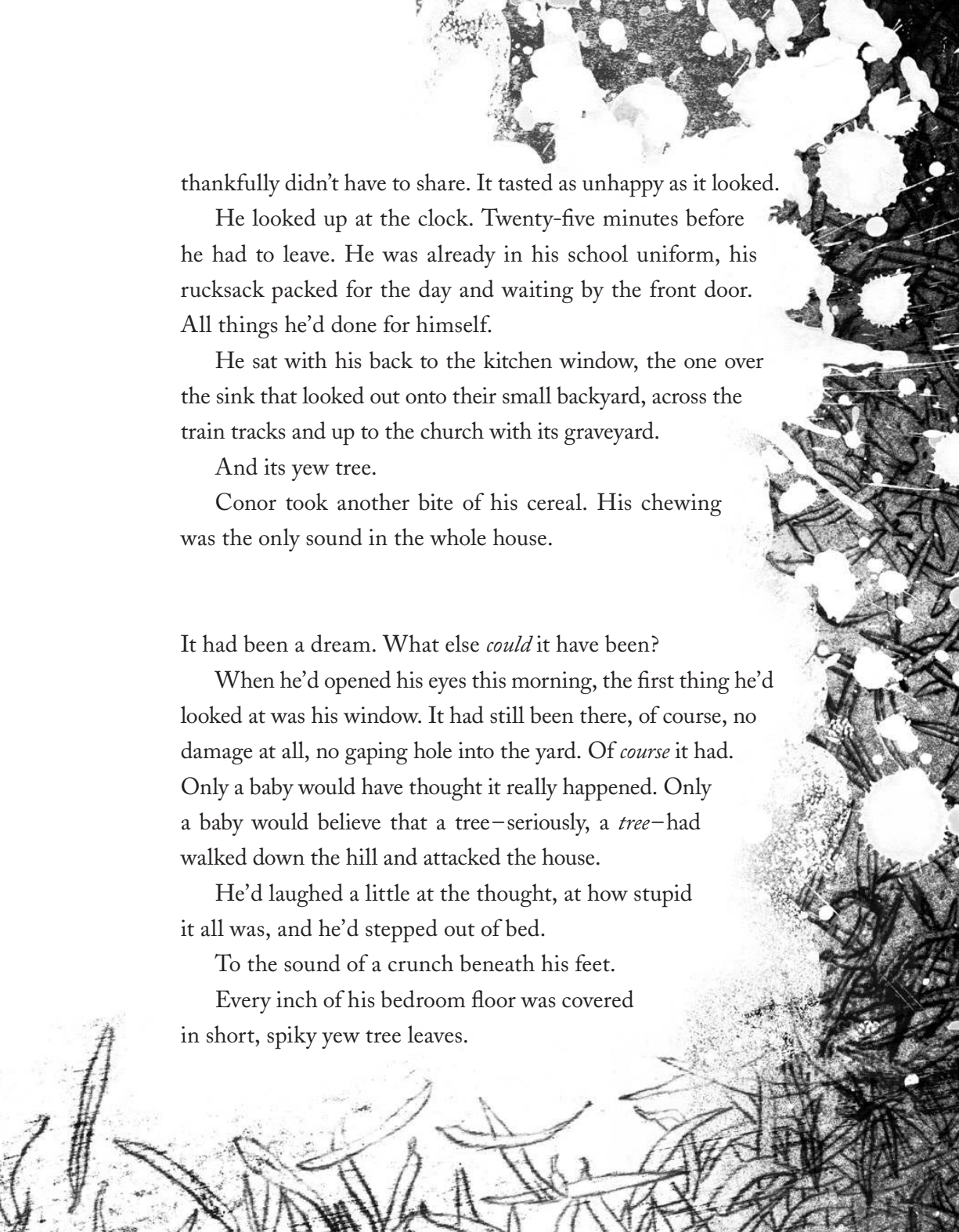
“Mum?” Conor asked, stepping into the kitchen. He knew she wouldn’t be in there—he couldn’t hear the kettle boiling, which she always did first thing—but he’d found himself asking for her a lot lately when he entered rooms in the house. He didn’t want to startle her, just in case she’d fallen asleep somewhere she hadn’t planned to.

But she wasn’t in the kitchen. Which meant she was probably still up in her bed. Which meant Conor would have to make his own breakfast, something he’d grown used to doing. Fine. *Good*, in fact, especially *this* morning.

He walked quickly to the trash and stuffed the plastic bag he was carrying down near the bottom, covering it up with other rubbish so it wouldn’t be obvious.

“There,” he said to no one, and stood breathing for a second. Then he nodded to himself and said, “Breakfast.”

Some bread in the toaster, some cereal in a bowl, some juice in a glass, and he was ready to go, sitting down at the little table in the kitchen to eat. His mum had her own bread and cereal which she bought at a health-food shop in town and which Conor



thankfully didn't have to share. It tasted as unhappy as it looked.

He looked up at the clock. Twenty-five minutes before he had to leave. He was already in his school uniform, his rucksack packed for the day and waiting by the front door. All things he'd done for himself.

He sat with his back to the kitchen window, the one over the sink that looked out onto their small backyard, across the train tracks and up to the church with its graveyard.

And its yew tree.

Conor took another bite of his cereal. His chewing was the only sound in the whole house.

It had been a dream. What else *could* it have been?

When he'd opened his eyes this morning, the first thing he'd looked at was his window. It had still been there, of course, no damage at all, no gaping hole into the yard. *Of course* it had. Only a baby would have thought it really happened. Only a baby would believe that a tree—seriously, a *tree*—had walked down the hill and attacked the house.

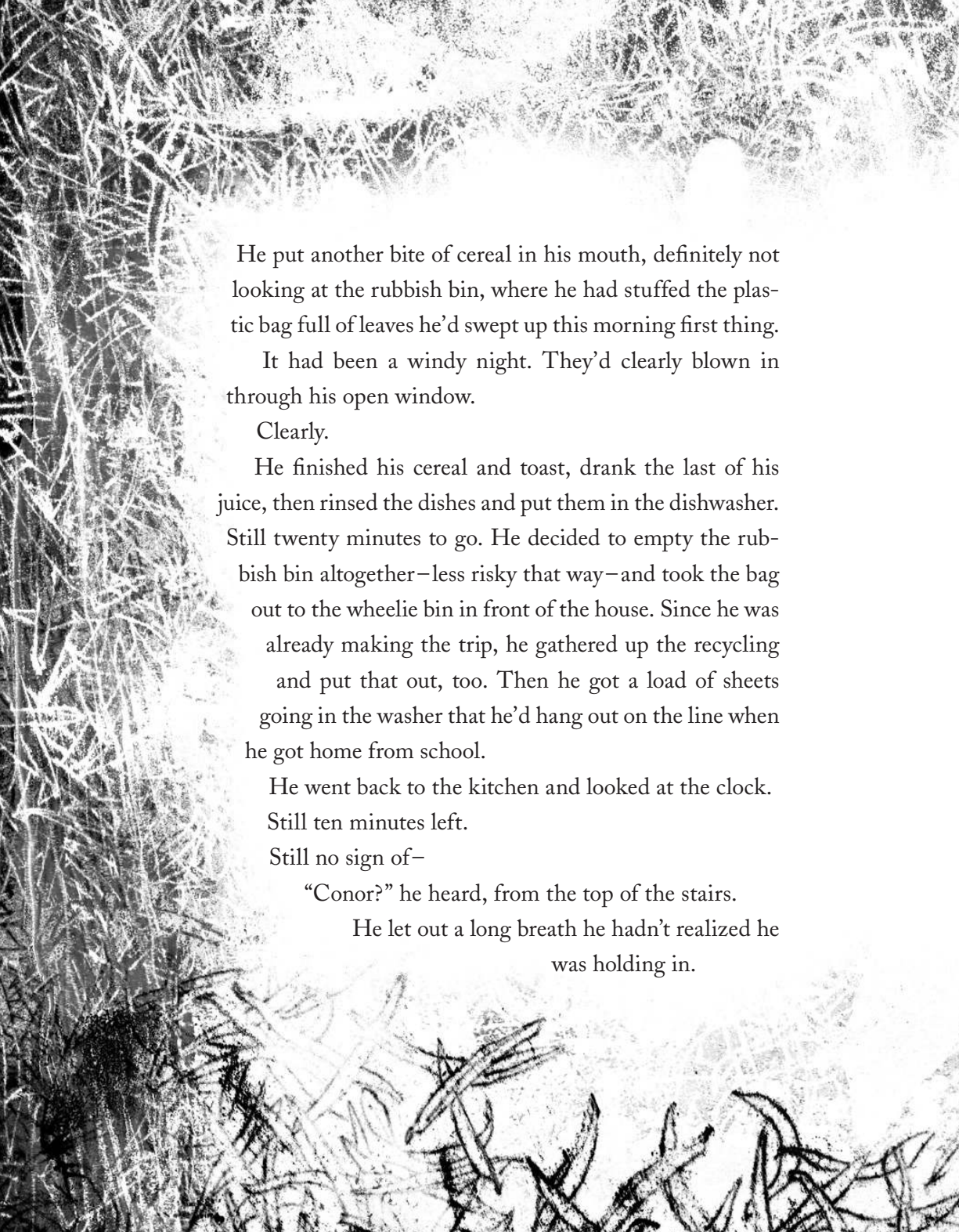
He'd laughed a little at the thought, at how stupid it all was, and he'd stepped out of bed.

To the sound of a crunch beneath his feet.

Every inch of his bedroom floor was covered in short, spiky yew tree leaves.







He put another bite of cereal in his mouth, definitely not looking at the rubbish bin, where he had stuffed the plastic bag full of leaves he'd swept up this morning first thing.

It had been a windy night. They'd clearly blown in through his open window.

Clearly.

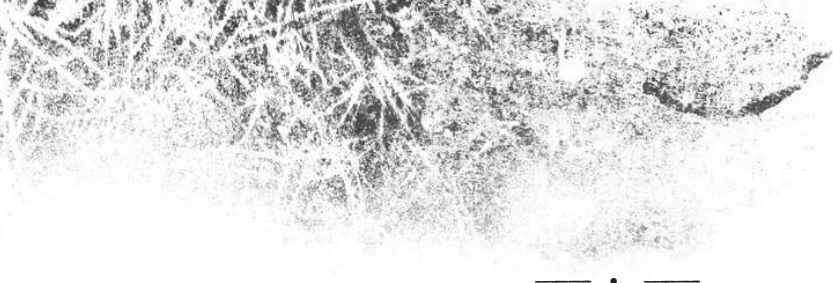
He finished his cereal and toast, drank the last of his juice, then rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. Still twenty minutes to go. He decided to empty the rubbish bin altogether—less risky that way—and took the bag out to the wheelie bin in front of the house. Since he was already making the trip, he gathered up the recycling and put that out, too. Then he got a load of sheets going in the washer that he'd hang out on the line when he got home from school.

He went back to the kitchen and looked at the clock. Still ten minutes left.

Still no sign of—

“Conor?” he heard, from the top of the stairs.

He let out a long breath he hadn't realized he was holding in.



— • —

“You’ve had breakfast?” his mum asked, leaning against the kitchen doorframe.

“Yes, Mum,” Conor said, rucksack in his hand.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, Mum.”

She looked at him doubtfully. Conor rolled his eyes. “Toast and cereal and juice,” he said. “I put the dishes in the dishwasher.”

“And took the rubbish out,” his mum said quietly, looking at how neat he’d left the kitchen.

“There’s washing going, too,” Conor said.

“You’re a good boy,” she said, and though she was smiling, he could hear sadness in it, too. “I’m sorry I wasn’t up.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s just this new round of—”

“It’s *okay*,” Conor said.

She stopped, but she still smiled back at him. She hadn’t tied her scarf around her head yet this morning, and her bare scalp looked too soft, too fragile in the morning light, like a baby’s. It made Conor’s stomach hurt to see it.

“Was that you I heard last night?” she asked.

Conor froze. “When?”

“Sometime after midnight, must have been,” she said, shuffling over to switch on the kettle. “I thought I was dreaming but

I could have sworn I heard your voice.”

“Probably just talking in my sleep,” Conor said, flatly.

“Probably,” his mum yawned. She took a mug off the rack hanging by the fridge. “I forgot to tell you,” she said, lightly, “your grandma’s coming by tomorrow.”

Conor’s shoulders sank. “Aw, *Mum*.”

“I know,” she said, “but you shouldn’t have to make your own breakfast every morning.”

“*Every* morning?” Conor said. “How long is she going to be here?”

“Conor—”

“We don’t need her here—”

“You know how I get at this point in the treatments, Conor—”

“We’ve been okay so far—”

“*Conor*,” his mum snapped, so harshly it seemed to surprise them both. There was a long silence. And then she smiled again, looking really, really tired.

“I’ll try to keep it as short as possible, okay?” she said. “I know you don’t like giving up your room, and I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have asked her if I didn’t need her to come, all right?”

Conor had to sleep on the settee every time his grandmother came to stay. But that wasn’t it. He didn’t like the way she *talked* to him, like he was an employee under evaluation. An evaluation he was going to fail. Plus, they *had* always managed so far, just the two of them, no matter how bad the treatments made her feel, it was the price she paid to get better, so why—?

“Only a couple of nights,” his mum said, as if she could read his mind. “Don’t worry, okay?”

He picked at the zipper on his rucksack, not saying anything, trying to think of other things. And then he remembered the bag of leaves he’d stuffed into the rubbish bin.

Maybe grandma staying in his room wasn’t the worst thing that could happen.

“There’s the smile I love,” his mum said, reaching for the kettle as it clicked off. Then she said, with mock-horror, “She’s going to bring me some of her old *wigs*, if you can believe it.” She rubbed her bare head with her free hand. “I’ll look like a zombie Margaret Thatcher.”

“I’m going to be late,” Conor said, eyeing the clock.

“Okay, sweetheart,” she said, teetering over to kiss him on the forehead. “You’re a good boy,” she said again. “I wish you didn’t have to be quite *so* good.”

As he left to head off for school, he saw her take her tea over to the kitchen window above the sink, and when he opened the front door to leave, he heard her say, “There’s that old yew tree,” as if she was talking to herself.



SCHOOL

He could already taste the blood in his mouth as he got up. He had bitten the inside of his lip when he hit the ground, and it was what he focused on now as he stood, the strange metallic flavor that made you want to spit it out immediately, like you'd eaten something that wasn't food at all.

He swallowed it instead. Harry and his cronies would have been thrilled beyond words if they knew Conor was bleeding. He could hear Anton and Sully laughing behind him, knew exactly the look on Harry's face, even though he couldn't see it. He could probably even guess what Harry would say next in that calm, amused voice of his that seemed to mimic every adult you never wanted to meet.

"Be careful of the steps there," Harry said. "You might fall."

Yep, that'd be about right.

It hadn't always been like this.

Harry was the Blond Wonder Child, the teachers' pet through every year of school. The first pupil with his hand in

the air, the fastest player on the soccer field, but for all that, just another kid in Conor's class. They hadn't been friends exactly—Harry didn't really have friends, only followers; Anton and Sully basically just stood behind him and laughed at everything he did—but they hadn't been enemies, either. Conor would have been mildly surprised if Harry had even known his name.

Somewhere over the past year, though, something had changed. Harry had started noticing Conor, catching his eye, looking at him with a detached amusement.

This change hadn't come when everything started with Conor's mum. No, it had come later, when Conor started having the nightmare, the *real* nightmare, not the stupid tree, the nightmare with the screaming and the falling, the nightmare he would never tell another living soul about. When Conor started having *that* nightmare, that's when Harry noticed him, like a secret mark had been placed on him that only Harry could see.

A mark that drew Harry to him like iron to a magnet.

On the first day of the new school year, Harry had tripped Conor coming into the school grounds, sending him tumbling to the pavement.

And so it had begun.

And so it had continued.



Conor kept his back turned as Anton and Sully laughed. He ran his tongue along the inside of his lip to see how bad the bite was. Not terrible. He'd live, if he could make it to class without anything further happening.

But then something further happened.

"Leave him alone!" Conor heard, wincing at the sound.

He turned and saw Lily Andrews pushing her furious face into Harry's, which only made Anton and Sully laugh even harder.

"Your poodle's here to save you," Anton said.

"I'm just making it a fair fight," Lily huffed, her wiry curls bouncing around all poodle-like, no matter how tightly she'd tied them back.

"You're bleeding, O'Malley," Harry said, calmly ignoring Lily.

Conor put his hand up to his mouth too late to catch a bit of blood coming out of the corner.

"He'll have to get his baldy mother to kiss it better for him!" Sully crowed.

Conor's stomach contracted to a ball of fire, like a little sun burning him up from the inside, but before he could react, Lily did. With a cry of outrage, she pushed an astonished Sully into the shrubbery, toppling him all the way over.

"Lillian Andrews!" came the voice of doom from halfway across the yard.

They froze. Even Sully paused in the act of getting up.

Miss Kwan, their Head of Year, was storming over to them, her scariest frown burnt into her face like a scar.

"They started it, Miss," Lily said, already defending herself.

"I don't want to hear it," Miss Kwan said. "Are you all right, Sullivan?"

Sully shot a quick glance at Lily, then got a pained look across his face. "I don't know, Miss," he said. "I might need to go home."

"Don't milk it," Miss Kwan said. "To my office, Lillian."

"But Miss, they were—"

"*Now*, Lillian."

"They were making fun of Conor's mother!"

This made everyone freeze again, and the burning sun in Conor's stomach grew hotter, ready to eat him alive.

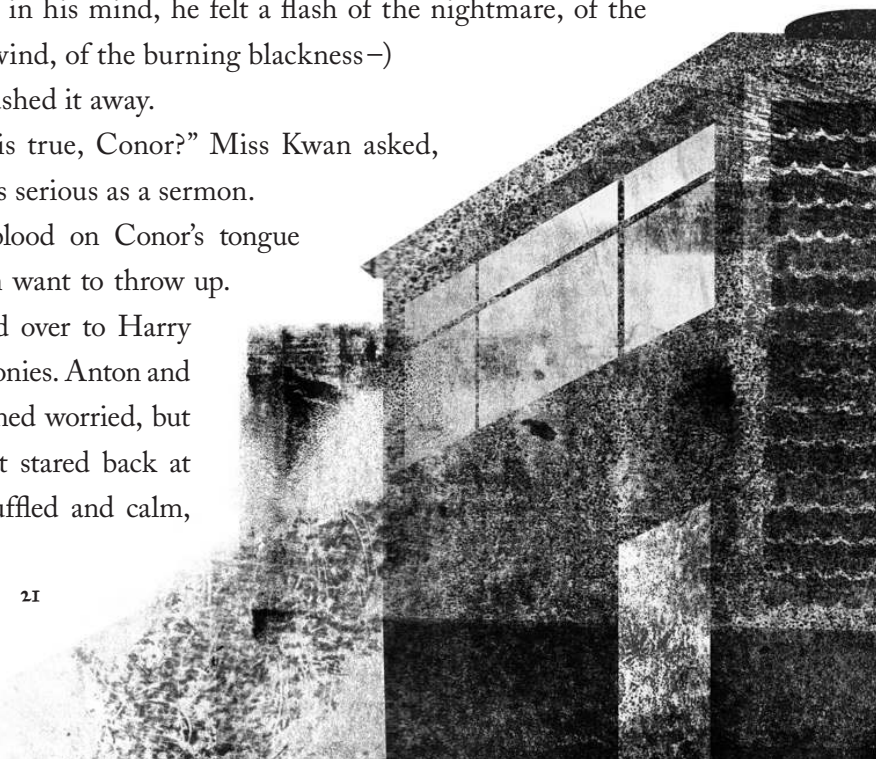
(—and in his mind, he felt a flash of the nightmare, of the howling wind, of the burning blackness—)

He pushed it away.

"Is this true, Conor?" Miss Kwan asked, her face as serious as a sermon.

The blood on Conor's tongue made him want to throw up.

He looked over to Harry and his cronies. Anton and Sully seemed worried, but Harry just stared back at him, unruffled and calm,



like he was genuinely curious as to what Conor might say.

“No, Miss, it’s not true,” Conor said, swallowing the blood.
“I just fell. They were helping me up.”

Lily’s face turned instantly into hurt surprise. Her mouth dropped open, but she made no sound.

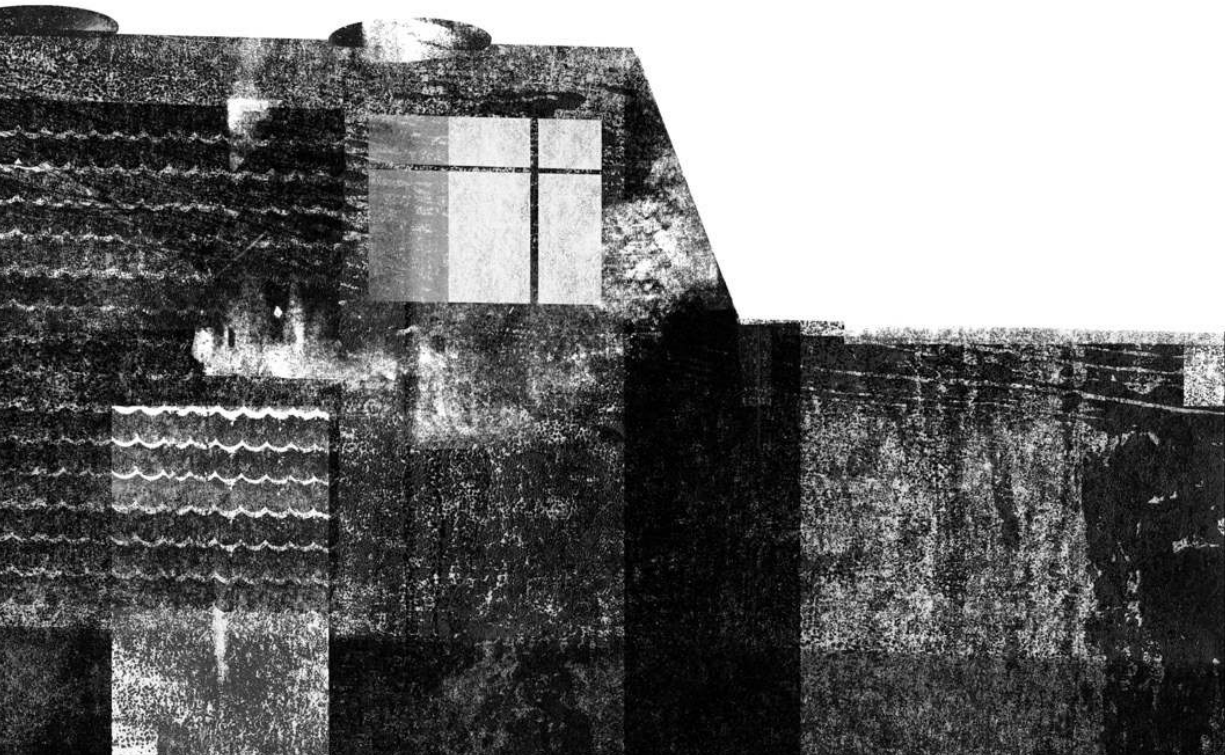
“Get to your classes,” Miss Kwan said. “Except for you, Lillian.”

Lily kept looking back at Conor as Miss Kwan pulled her away, but Conor turned from her.

To find Harry holding his rucksack out for him.

“Well done, O’Malley,” Harry said.

Conor said nothing, just took the bag from him roughly and made his way inside.



LIFE WRITING

Stories, Conor thought with dread as he walked home.

It was after school, and he'd made his escape. He'd gotten through the rest of the day avoiding Harry and the others, though they probably knew better than to risk causing him another "accident" so soon after nearly getting caught by Miss Kwan. He'd also avoided Lily, who had returned to lessons with red, puffy eyes and a scowl you could hang meat from. When the final bell rang, Conor had rushed out fast, feeling the burden of school and of Harry and of Lily drop from his shoulders as he put one street and then another between himself and all of that.

Stories, he thought again.

"*Your* stories," Mrs. Marl had said in their English lesson. "Don't think you haven't lived long enough to have a story to tell."

Life writing, she'd called it, an assignment for them to write about themselves. Their family tree, where they'd lived, holiday trips, and happy memories.

Important things that had happened.

Conor shifted his rucksack on his shoulder. He could think of a couple of important things that had happened. Nothing

he wanted to write about, though. His father leaving. The cat wandering off one day and never coming back.

The afternoon when his mother said they needed to have a little talk.

He frowned and kept walking.

But then again, he also remembered the day *before* that day. His mum had taken him to his favorite Indian restaurant and let him order as much vindaloo as he wanted. Then she'd laughed and said, "Why the hell not?" and ordered plates of it for herself, too. They'd started farting before they'd even got back in the car. On the drive home, they could hardly talk from laughing and farting so hard.

Conor smiled just thinking about it. Because it *hadn't* been a drive home. It had been a surprise trip to the cinema on a school night, to a film Conor had already seen four times but knew his mum was sick to death of. There they were, though, sitting through it again, still giggling to themselves, eating buckets of popcorn and drinking buckets of Coke.

Conor wasn't stupid. When they'd had the "little talk" the next day, he knew what his mum had done and why she had done it. But that didn't take away from how much fun that night had been. How hard they'd laughed. How anything had seemed possible. How anything good could have happened to them right then and there and they wouldn't have been surprised.

But he wasn't going to be writing about *that* either.

“Hey!” A voice calling behind him made him groan. “Hey, Conor, wait!”

Lily.

“Hey!” she said, catching up with him and planting herself right in his way so he had to stop or run into her. She was out of breath, but her face was still furious. “Why did you do that today?” she said.

“Leave me alone,” Conor said, pushing past her.

“Why didn’t you tell Miss Kwan what really happened?” Lily persisted, following him. “Why did you let me get into trouble?”

“Why did you butt in when it was none of your business?”

“I was trying to *help* you.”

“I don’t need your help,” Conor said. “I was doing fine on my own.”

“You were not!” Lily said. “You were bleeding.”

“It’s none of your *business*,” Conor snapped again and picked up his pace.

“I’ve got detention *all week*,” Lily complained. “*And* a note home to my parents.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“But it’s your fault.”

Conor stopped suddenly and turned to her. He looked so angry she stepped back, startled, almost like she was afraid. “It’s *your* fault,” he said. “It’s *all* your fault.”

He stormed off back down the pavement. “We used to be friends,” Lily called after him.

“*Used* to be,” Conor said without turning around.

He’d known Lily forever. Or for as long as he could remember, which was basically the same thing.

Their mums were friends from before Conor and Lily were born, and Lily had been like a sister who lived in another house, especially when one mum or the other would babysit. He and Lily had only been friends, though, none of the romantic stuff they got teased for sometimes at school. In a way, it was hard for Conor to even look at Lily as a *girl*, at least not in the same way as the other girls at school. How could you when you’d both played sheep in the same nativity play, aged five? When you knew how much she used to pick her nose? When *she* knew how long you’d needed a night-light after your father moved out? It had just been a friendship, normal as anything.

But then his mum’s “little talk” had happened, and what came next was simple, really, and sudden.

No one knew.

Then Lily’s mum knew, of course.

Then Lily knew.

And then everyone knew. Everyone. Which changed the whole world in a single day.

And he was never going to forgive her for that.

Another street and another street more and there was his house, small but detached. It had been the one thing his mum had insisted on in the divorce, that it was theirs free and clear and they wouldn't have to move after his dad had left for America with Stephanie, the new wife. That had been six years ago, so long now that Conor sometimes couldn't remember what it was like having a dad in the house.

Didn't mean he still didn't think about it, though.

He looked up past his house to the hill beyond, the church steeple poking up into the cloudy sky.

And the yew tree hovering over the graveyard like a sleeping giant.

Conor forced himself to keep looking at it, making himself see that it was just a tree, a tree like any other, like any one of those that lined the railway track.

A tree. That's all it was. That's all it *ever* was. A tree.

A tree that, as he watched, reared up a giant face to look at him in the sunlight, its arms reaching out, its voice saying, *Conor—*

He stepped back so fast, he nearly fell into the street, catching himself on the hood of a parked car.

When he looked back up, it was just a tree again.

THREE STORIES

He lay in his bed that night, wide awake, watching the clock on his bedside table.

It had been the slowest evening imaginable. Cooking frozen lasagna had tired his mum out so badly she fell asleep five minutes into *EastEnders*. Conor hated the program but he made sure it recorded for her, then he spread a duvet over her and went and did the dishes.

His mum's mobile had gone off once, not waking her. Conor saw it was Lily's mum calling and let it go to voice mail. He did his schoolwork at the kitchen table, stopping before he got to Mrs. Marl's Life Writing homework, then he played around on the Internet for a while in his room before brushing his teeth and seeing himself to bed. He'd barely turned out the light when his mum had very apologetically—and very groggily—come in to kiss him good night.

A few minutes later, he'd heard her in the bathroom, throwing up.

"Do you need any help?" he'd called from his bed.

"No, sweetheart," his mum called back, weakly. "I'm kind of used to it by now."

That was the thing. Conor was used to it, too. It was always the second and third days after the treatments that were the worst, always the days when she was the most tired, when she threw up the most. It had almost become normal.

After a while, the throwing up had stopped. He'd heard the bathroom light click off and her bedroom door shut.

That was two hours ago. He'd lain awake since then, waiting. But for what?

His bedside clock read 12:05. Then it read 12:06. He looked over to his bedroom window, shut tight even though the night was still warm. His clock ticked over to 12:07.

He got up, went over to the window, and looked out.

The monster stood in his yard, looking right back at him.

Open up, the monster said, its voice as clear as if the window wasn't between them. *I want to talk to you.*

"Yeah, sure," Conor said, keeping his voice low. "Because that's what monsters always want. To *talk*."

The monster smiled. It was a ghastly sight. *If I must force my way in*, it said, *I will do so happily.*

It raised a gnarled woody fist to punch through the wall of Conor's bedroom.

"No!" Conor said. "I don't want you to wake my mum."

Then come outside, the monster said, and even in his room,

Conor's nose filled with the moist smell of earth and wood and sap.

"What do you want from me?" Conor said.

The monster pressed its face close to the window.

*It is not what I want from you, Conor O'Malley, it said. It is what **you** want from **me**.*

"I don't want anything from you," Conor said.

Not yet, said the monster. But you will.

"It's only a dream," Conor said to himself in the backyard, looking up at the monster silhouetted against the moon in the night sky. He folded his arms tightly against his body, not because it was cold, but because he couldn't actually believe he'd tiptoed down the stairs, unlocked the back door, and come outside.

He still felt calm. Which was weird. This nightmare—because it was surely a nightmare, of course it was—was so different from the other nightmare.

No terror, no panic, no darkness, for one thing.

And yet here was a monster, clear as the clearest night, towering thirty or forty feet above him, breathing heavily in the night air.

"It's only a dream," he said again.

But what is a dream, Conor O'Malley? the monster said, bending down so its face was close to Conor's. *Who is to say that it is not everything **else** that is the dream?*

Every time the monster moved, Conor could hear the creak of wood, groaning and yawning in the monster's huge body. He could see, too, the power in the monster's arms, great wiry ropes of branches constantly twisting and shifting together in what must have been tree muscle, connected to a massive trunk of a chest, topped by a head and teeth that could chomp him down in one bite.

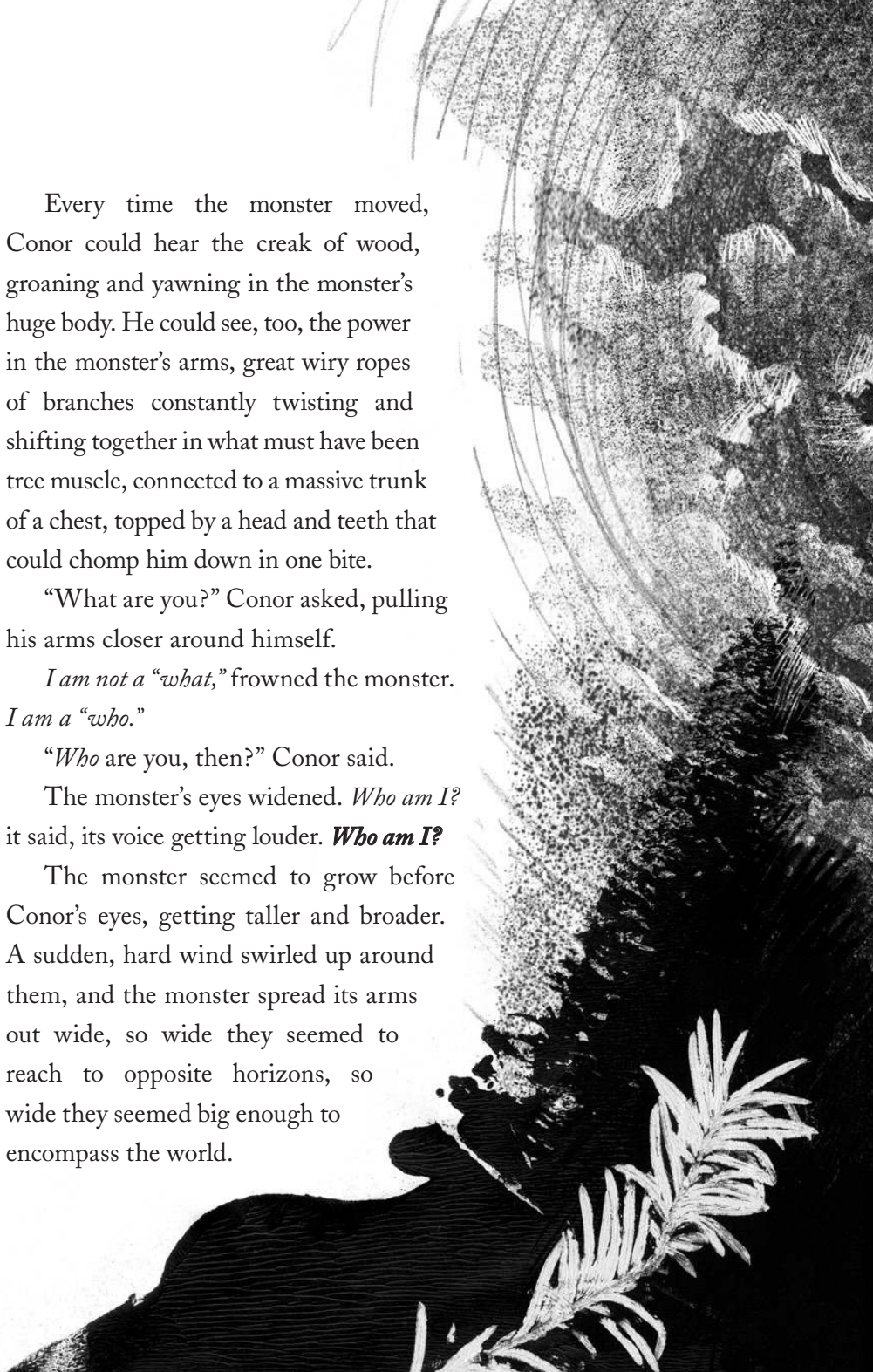
"What are you?" Conor asked, pulling his arms closer around himself.

I am not a "what," frowned the monster. *I am a "who."*

"*Who* are you, then?" Conor said.

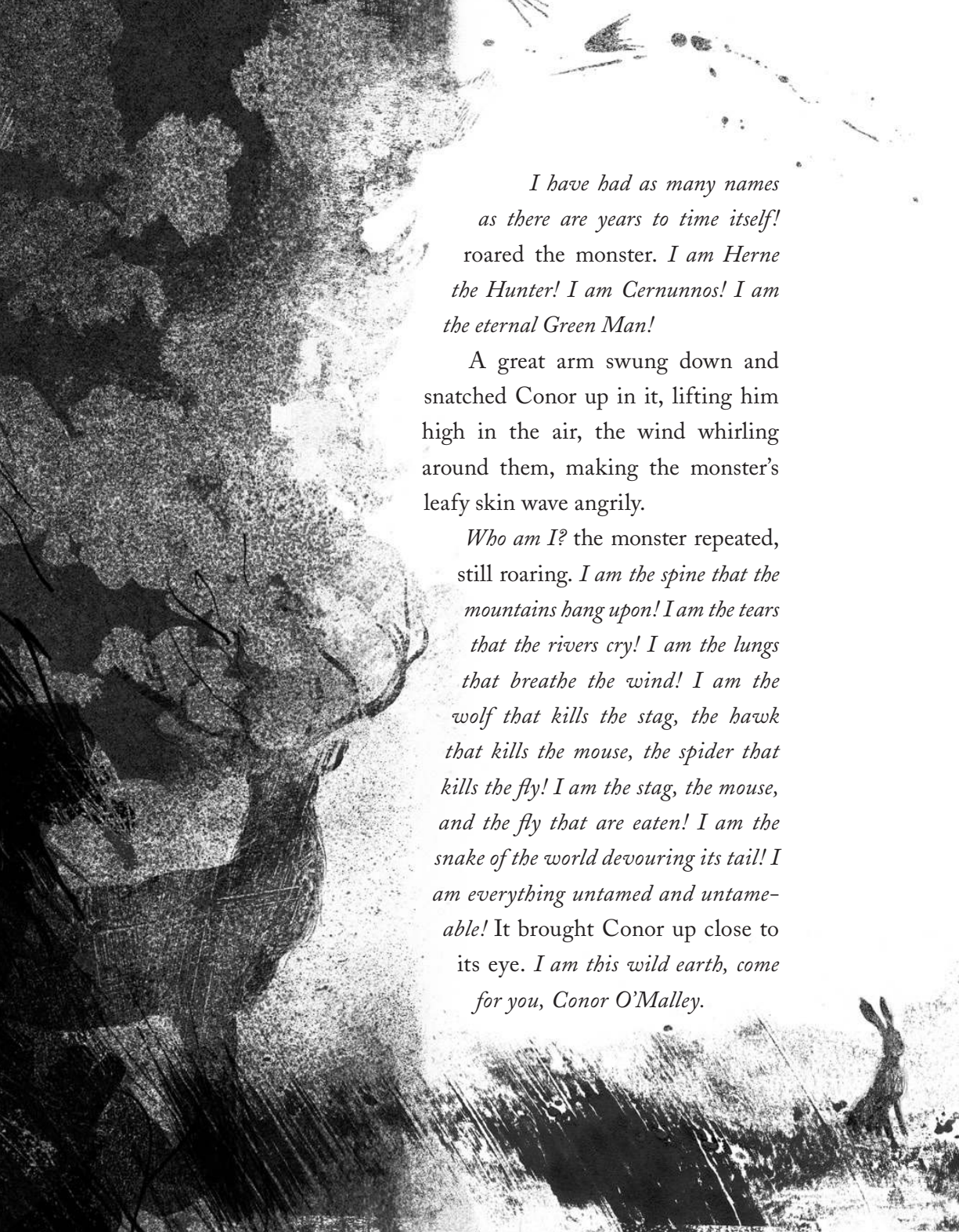
The monster's eyes widened. *Who am I?* it said, its voice getting louder. ***Who am I?***

The monster seemed to grow before Conor's eyes, getting taller and broader. A sudden, hard wind swirled up around them, and the monster spread its arms out wide, so wide they seemed to reach to opposite horizons, so wide they seemed big enough to encompass the world.









*I have had as many names
as there are years to time itself!
roared the monster. I am Herne
the Hunter! I am Cernunnos! I am
the eternal Green Man!*

A great arm swung down and
snatched Conor up in it, lifting him
high in the air, the wind whirling
around them, making the monster's
leafy skin wave angrily.

*Who am I? the monster repeated,
still roaring. I am the spine that the
mountains hang upon! I am the tears
that the rivers cry! I am the lungs
that breathe the wind! I am the
wolf that kills the stag, the hawk
that kills the mouse, the spider that
kills the fly! I am the stag, the mouse,
and the fly that are eaten! I am the
snake of the world devouring its tail! I
am everything untamed and untame-
able! It brought Conor up close to
its eye. I am this wild earth, come
for you, Conor O'Malley.*